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Engaging with Families in Child Protection: Lessons from Practitioner Research in Scotland

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from practitioner-led research on engagement with families in the child protection system in Scotland. Engagement is here defined in a participative sense, to mean the involvement of family members in shaping social work processes. Key findings include: the importance of workers building trusting relationships; the value of honest and clear communication, information and explanation; and the potential for formal structures such as reports and meetings to hinder family engagement. These findings contribute to a growing critique of managerialism in social work.

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Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of a study of engagement with involuntary service users, undertaken by researchers at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland and practitioners in six Scottish local authority social work departments. Over eight months, small-scale practitioner-led research projects took place within a rubric of knowledge exchange and capacity building, with mentoring and support provided by academics. The aim of the projects was to explore how social workers might engage better with 'involuntary service users,' defined broadly to include those whose involvement with social work services is mandated by law. This paper reports on findings from two of the practitioner research projects, which explored engagement with families involved in the child protection system.

The child protection system across the English-speaking world has been subject to damning critique in recent years (Lonne, Parton, Thomas, & Harries, 2009). Political and managerial responses to child protection failures have been to institute performance management systems, forcing social workers to spend increasing amounts of time on administrative tasks at the expense of time spent in direct contact with families (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010; Healy, 2009; Scourfield & Welsh, 2003). Moreover, the adversarial nature of much child protection work has led to a situation characterised by widespread fear and suspicion (Holland, 2000). The increasing recognition of these systemic problems is reflected in the UK by the government's commissioning of Prof. Eileen Munro to conduct a review of the child protection system in England (Munro, 2010). In this context, supporting social workers to engage with families is both timely and a major challenge.

Family engagement, participation and rights in social work

In this paper, we work with a definition of family engagement as a form of participation, in which family members are engaged at some level in shaping and directing social work processes. In child protection social work, some examples of this kind of family engagement include: initiating dialogue with family members about how they view their problems and what they see as the solutions; supporting family members to take part in meetings such as child protection case conferences; giving due regard to the views of both parents and children; and taking into account the different communication styles of family members, such as in the presentation of information and formal reports. In Scotland, this approach can be seen in the current guidance on child protection, which states that "[s]ervice users should be listened to, respected and responded to" and that "[a]ccount should always be taken of diversity and equality issues. For example, adults with a learning disability or people from minority ethnic communities...may have specific communication needs and require flexible approaches by staff to engage with them." (Scottish Government, 2010, p.25-26)

Looking at the wider context, there has been a widespread growth of interest in participation over the last fifteen years, in various fields of policy, practice and scholarship across different countries (Hinton, Tisdall, Gallagher, & Elsley, 2008). In

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the UK public sector, the growth of participatory initiatives can be understood as a confluence of different – and arguably contradictory – forces. Much of the impetus for service user participation has come from service-user activist groups (e.g. disabled people, mental health service users), employing a discourse of rights, in which user engagement is constructed as a form of social justice (Beresford, 2000; Hodge, 2005; Postle & Beresford, 2007; *Shaping Our Lives*, 2007). At the same time, statutory bodies have mobilised consumerist discourses, which construct service users as customers within a capitalist market (Scottish Executive, 2006). Such notions have been central in managerial moves to 'modernise' and 'reform' public services, with user participation heralded as a means of ensuring greater efficiency and accountability (Carey, 2009; Cowden & Singh, 2007).

Participative notions of user engagement are particularly problematic when those 'users' are involved with statutory social services as the result of legal mandate. Families involved in child protection systems, for example, cannot reasonably be viewed as consumers of social work (Cowden & Singh, 2007). Rights-based discourses, meanwhile, evoke the image of families whose members know what they want and can articulate this in a relatively clear, coherent and consistent way. Again, this may not always be the case, particularly where families are experiencing trauma and crisis and are struggling to understand what is happening. **Furthermore, in child protection, the rights of parents and those of children can often be in conflict.**

Practitioner research on family engagement in child protection

The remainder of this paper is based on data from two practitioner-led research projects (PRPs) that explored the challenges of service user engagement in child protection work. PRP1 was located in an urban local authority. It sought to identify factors that had helped and hindered engagement between social workers and service users. In-depth interviews were carried out with parents in five families and their allocated social workers. All were cases in which there had been initial resistance and hostility, but this had given way to greater engagement. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed, looking in particular for points of convergence or divergence from previous research in this area.

PRP2 took place in a small local authority covering a more rural area. The project aimed to investigate barriers to service user engagement in statutory child protection, and to identify ways to overcome these. It involved three focus groups with a total of 32 social workers, and a review of transcripts of interviews with two families previously undertaken for quality assurance purposes. Again, a simple thematic analysis was carried out to identify key messages.

Practitioner-led research is a growing area of activity in social work, and one that raises methodological challenges (Mitchell, Lunt, & Shaw, 2010). In our project, most practitioners had little previous research experience, so the academics organised half-day training sessions timed to coincide with key stages, covering design, ethics and recruitment, data collection and analysis and dissemination. Each project was also

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assigned an academic mentor whose role was to provide guidance via regular meetings and emails (see Fouche & Lunt, 2010).

There were methodological limitations in both projects. Due to the short timescale and the ethical challenges of carrying out research with vulnerable families, only small numbers of service users were involved, and none were children. Whilst we are well aware of the value of involving children in research (Cree, Kay, & Tisdall, 2002; Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2009), we felt unable to do this in a way which would have been ethical given the sensitivity of the topic and the resources available. However, we ensured that both projects gave consideration to children: in PRP1, interviews included questions about engagement with children, whilst in PRP2 the family interview transcripts included the views of two children. The practitioner researchers also had to balance the research with their existing workloads, and this placed limits on the quantity of data that could be collected. However, the practitioner-led nature of the research was beneficial for developing dialogue between academics and social workers (Fouche & Lunt, 2010; Mitchell, Lunt, & Shaw, 2010), and has resulted in findings that are of direct relevance to front-line practice.

The ethics of both projects were given careful consideration, particularly in PRP1 where service users were interviewed directly. In this project, following clearance from the local authority's ethics committee, social workers were first approached, given an outline document explaining the project, and invited to take part. Those who agreed identified appropriate clients and approached them, explaining the project verbally and gaining verbal consent. At the start of the interviews, the project was explained by the researcher, consent was renegotiated verbally and a consent form was signed. In PRP2, written consent was obtained from social workers, based on a full explanation of what the study would involve. In both studies, all references to names, locations and workplaces were removed, and care has been taken in all reports to omit any information from which individuals could be identified.

In the following sections, we summarise the key themes across both projects in relation to engagement with families. These are: the importance of building trusting relationships; the value of honest and clear communication, information and explanation; the issues raised by engaging with different family members; engagement in social work meetings; and engagement in preparing reports.

Building trust in long-term relationships

An overarching theme to emerge in both projects was the importance of relationships between professionals and service users, developed over time, in which trust is built up gradually. This finding supports previous research (Bell, 2002; Beresford, Croft, & Adshead, 2008; Holland, 2000; Schofield & Thoburn, 1996). The sense of mistrust surrounding social work was evident from our data:

Every time a social worker phoned me, the first thing that'll come out my mouth is 'you're not taking my bairn [child] off me'...I'm petrified that

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they'll take my bairn off me again because they done it when she was born... I can't believe anything that a social worker says (PRP1, service user interview D)

In this context, building trust was repeatedly identified as essential for overcoming fear, thereby enabling engagement to take place. Social workers said trust could be built by simple strategies, such as ensuring that any commitments made – agreeing to phone or visit at a certain time, for example – were upheld (see also Buckley, Carr, & Whelan, 2010):

stick to your word. Say you will do something and do it because that builds trust and if you don't why would they trust us? (PRP1, social worker A)

Being very honest, very upfront, making sure that if I do say I will do something I do it because there was this history of always expecting to be let down. (PRP1, social worker B)

In keeping with recent research (Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, & Hughes, 2008), empathy was also seen as important for maintaining the relationship in discussions of difficult issues where service users might respond negatively:

You can still be honest and open and fair and still tackle difficult things but still maintain a good relationship. And that is the skill involved...showing empathy...seeing them as human beings and say, 'look I know this is hard for you...but we have to make it better'...you have to find a way of tapping in, something that they can connect with you so that they can see I am human as well and I see the human side of them (PRP1, social worker A)

Some practitioners expressed frustration at the limits on relational working imposed by heavy caseloads:

"If we had less of a caseload we could build relationships and work with families to effect change" (PRP2, social worker)

However, when relational working was possible, it generally appeared that over time and with persistence relationships tended to improve, even where initial difficulties had been pronounced. As trust developed, service users became increasingly able to express their views:

"At the beginning I went along with what was said and agreed but as meetings progressed I was more able to voice my opinion" (PRP2, service user interview)

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Several respondents commented on the importance of focussing on what is positive in service users' behaviours, as well as risk factors and concerns. For one social worker, the key to engagement was to recognise service users' good intentions whilst also explaining how their behaviours were causing damage:

“if I just go in all accusatory and say, ‘you are bad, you are this, you are that’, course you are not going to work with me, but if I say to them, ‘look I can see that you genuinely care about your kids and you want to do better but you are abusing them in this way, do you see how’...that makes a big difference to them.” (PRP1, social worker A)

Advocacy and helping service users to fight for their rights were also noted as helpful for building relationships, reinforcing messages from previous research (Cree and Davis, 2007; Doel and Best, 2008).

Finally, the importance of working at the service user's own pace was highlighted. Rigid social work timescales around, for example, ceasing drug use or leaving abusive partners, could be unhelpful:

I have minor learning difficulties and I said that I will get there, you just need to give me time and work slowly with me...be patient with me instead of saying to me you need to do this by a certain date. Ever since then me and my social worker got more closer and worked together...you've just got to do it in your own pace in your own time instead of Social Workers having timescales on everything. (PRP1, service user interview A)

Again, this resonates with previous research on service user engagement (Hernandez et al., 2010; Munro, 2010). It is worth noting that in child protection work there can be significant conflicts between the timescales of parents, children and social workers, particularly where the latter have concerns around child safety or children's development, or where there are structural issues such as delays in referral or waiting lists for support services. In some cases, immediate action may be warranted; in others, a more gradual approach may work better. There are no easy solutions to such dilemmas. Our data merely highlight the importance of taking into account service users' views and wishes when making decisions about timescales.

Communication, explanation and information

Both service users and social workers repeatedly emphasised the importance of clear and honest communication, information and explanation throughout social work processes. In many cases, this had been critical to helping or hindering the formation of trusting relationships. Several service users reported having struggled to understand what was happening to them and why. In such situations, clear explanation was an important feature of family engagement:

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I wrote down on a big sheet of paper what the social work department were worried about, why we were involved with them. And they were quite surprised...I looked back historically at the files and I looked up the current situation and I wrote down five things and they said, 'nobody has ever told us that before'. (PRP1, social worker D)

The data from PRP1 suggested that in some cases there were profound discrepancies between service users' and social workers' understandings of what was happening and why. Open and honest communication with service users could result in deeper understanding on both sides:

There was a lot of domestic violence with [the service user's partner]. And we would go over why, and she would go, 'Why? He has never hit the kids,' and it took us to all sit down and explain, and it took us a few attempts...to explain that he might not deliberately hit the child but what if accidentally one day or what about the emotional impact...and it is about explaining all the reasons why we were worried...helping her to understand that this could have a negative impact long term on her child. (PRP1, social worker A)

Explanation appears as important for children and young people as for adults (Cashmore, 2002; Franklin & Sloper, 2009; Schofield & Thoburn, 1996). This can be a challenging area of practice. When asked if things had improved for his family, one parent said:

Aye and nup [yes and no]. Aye because he [child] is a lot happier and nup because he doesn't understand why both parents are not in the house together. (PRP2, service user interview)

The importance of honesty was also a recurring theme. Workers said that, whilst service users might not like *what* was being said, they tended to appreciate *that* it was being said to them:

although there a lot that I say to her that she really doesn't like and at times we have very confrontational meetings, she knows that I am never going to say anything to anyone else about her that hasn't been said or discussed with her first and that is very important for her. (PRP1, social worker B)

Conversely, several service users reported how relationships had been damaged where social workers had not been open, leading to a sense for service users that things were going on 'behind their backs' or that social workers were being 'sneaky'.

Engaging with families

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The overarching message from practitioners in relation to family work was about the importance of an inclusive approach. This supports previous research, which has highlighted the importance of engaging with both parents and children, and the danger in child protection work of focussing on the needs of children whilst neglecting those of their parents (Brandon, 1999; Creegan, Henderson, & King, 2006; Tregeagle & Mason, 2008). Social workers in our research spoke about how they had found ways to involve the different family members in their work. The following excerpt captures the inclusivity and flexibility of one practitioner's approach:

I started my involvement with them by saying I have read what there is to read but I would be interested to hear what your story is, and [both parents] got the opportunity – which was difficult because...they do talk and interrupt over each other constantly – and it was quite difficult to get them to keep silent while the other one [spoke]...so together as a couple and as two separate individuals they told me their stories and they told me their hopes, and their aspirations for themselves and for their children and for their relationship and what they wanted for their future.... The oldest child was having the most difficulty in her relationship with her parents and I spent most time with her...I also spent a lot of time with the two year old. (PRP1, social worker E)

Some practitioners recounted instances when they had acted as mediators between children and parents. For example, one spoke of how doing an exercise with a child to explore her worries had led her to reveal that she was cold at night and wanted another blanket:

I was then able to say to her, 'right, will we go and see your mum now and let's talk about it' so she got a blanket that night, and I know it sounds not much but for that wee girl...she sees that it can make a difference (PRP1, social worker B)

Social workers commented on the times and spaces in which different kinds of participation could happen. For example, car journeys were cited as particularly useful for engaging with children:

If I see them in the car, if I am driving them somewhere I get a lot, I think most social workers would say that's where you get most out of kids. If I am seeing them in the house when mum is there...they don't like that, they get quite guarded. (PRP1, social worker B)

Practitioners also remarked upon the limits to participation for children who had little previous experience of feeling able to freely express what they wanted:

she [the child] is a very frightened little girl...So getting a child like that – and she is only six – asking 'what is it you want?' – was quite hard for

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her, I think. I think it is the culture – how she was brought up – just don't say anything. (PRP1, social worker D)

Family engagement in social work meetings

Formal social work meetings were generally experienced negatively by service users, and practitioners appeared to be aware of this:

“I didn't like it how everyone was round that table and it was like they were judging you...it was just such an intense thing having to sit there and just listen to, you know, what was round about you.” (PRP1, service user interview A)

“Meetings are very formal, imagine how the family feels when they know it's all about them and their parenting” (PRP2, social worker)

“There is a consensus amongst parents that if your child goes to a case conference then they will be registered [1] as the decisions have been made even before the meeting has started” (PRP2, social worker)

When thinking about what might improve meetings, preparation beforehand was seen as important, echoing findings in previous research (Buckley, Carr, & Whelan, 2010; Schofield & Thoburn, 1996), and reinforcing our discussion of communication, explanation and information. The environment in which meetings take place was noted as a barrier to engagement by some interviewees. Respondents also suggested that service users should be able to bring someone to support them. Several said it might help if the number of professionals was reduced:

In a more comfy room. You know, just more...just not so professional really...fewer people maybe – less people. Like just maybe a social worker, you and maybe a relative and maybe the rest of them could hear by writing or phone call. (PRP1, service user interview A)

Simplicity of language and recognising the positive were both noted as important in meetings:

I talked to the other people – the professionals – that we needed to use language that was understandable and to try to keep away from really negative comments and try to think positively and think about strengths... Don't deny the risks...but talk about strengths as well, but talk about it in a language that was normal, understandable. (PRP1, social worker E)

Reports and family engagement

In both practitioner research projects, concerns were expressed about reports acting as barriers to engagement and participation, in keeping with findings from previous studies (Creagan, Henderson, & King, 2006; Whitehead et al., 2009). Three key

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factors were evident from our research. First, there was a consensus that reports were largely negative and therefore difficult for service users to accept:

I was daunted by the report, how is a child or family getting a 33 page report going to feel when you are reading so much negativity about yourself? (PRP2, social worker)

Second, interviewees said that reports were often difficult for service users to understand. Several emphasised the value of simple, short reports written in plain language and avoiding professional jargon:

you know how you've got these words for certain things with Social Work – maybe if they just put it in plain English – just simple, so then people would understand it better. (PRP1, service user interview A)

it was so much easier for me to write something like 'non-attendance at school' when what you should write is 'she doesn't go to school'...that fundamentally made a huge difference writing it down in very simple language why we were worried. (PRP1, social worker D)

A third concern surrounded participation in the preparation of reports. There were several accounts of service users being upset when reports had not been shared with them in advance of meetings. Both service users' and professionals' comments strongly suggest that involving service users when preparing reports is vital for effective engagement:

[the social workers] always came up and read the report and if I didn't like something they would change it or rewrite it. You know, rephrase it...I could just phone her up and say I don't like how you've wrote that – this sentence, can you rephrase it in a more better way. (PRP1, service user interview A)

However, in PRP2, social workers argued that participative report-writing was difficult due to high caseloads:

If we had a real [realistic] caseload we could work at making a plan with our families because just now we sit in our office and do the plan and give it to families (PRP2, social worker)

Discussion

The findings of both practitioner research projects add detail to the broad messages from previous studies in this area. Despite the small number of respondents, our data are consistent with previous research, suggesting that they are credible accounts of front-line social work encounters.

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The quality of the relationship between service users and social workers was found to be crucial for effective engagement, in the participative sense as we have defined it in this paper. The data give examples of how such relationships can be established, showing how social workers can build trust in the face of service users' fears, and underlining the need for honest, upfront and clear communication about the situation, the social work processes and likely outcomes. Our data suggest a range of measures that may help social workers to engage with families in the child protection system:

- persistence even where there is initial hostility
- consistency and 'doing what you say you will'
- maintaining empathy and respect when discussing difficult issues
- a balanced attitude, acknowledging positive factors whilst remaining clear about risks
- flexibility around institutional timescales
- taking time to explain clearly to service users what is happening and why
- being honest and 'upfront', even where service users may not like what is said
- an inclusive approach to working with families, finding ways to enable different members to express their views
- reducing the number of professionals at meetings, and allowing service users to bring someone for support
- avoiding professional jargon in meetings and reports
- keeping reports short
- involving service users in preparing reports

These findings have clear implications for social work with families in the child protection system. Placed in the wider context of our project, which aimed to explore engagement with involuntary service users, these findings are also consistent with messages from research on social work engagement with other groups, such as people with disabilities and those with mental health issues (Lindow & Morris, 1995; Tee et al., 2007).

We believe that the involvement of practitioners in designing and carrying out the research has been particularly useful for producing findings of relevance to front-line practice. The practitioners' insights into local priorities and issues helped in shaping the research questions, and their contacts with service users and other staff aided recruitment. Since completing their projects, the practitioner-researchers have reported various impacts resulting from the research, including direct changes to practitioners' ways of working with service users, the development of improved staff training on child protection, and the opening up of debates amongst their colleagues around issues such as relationship-based versus managerial styles of social work.

Indeed, our findings contribute to wider critiques of managerialism in social services. Building trusting, long-term relationships with service users clearly involves far more nuanced, reflexive practice than can be accommodated by the dominant culture (in

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UK social work at least) of accountability and performance management. The formality and professional-dominance of reports and meetings were seen as barriers to engagement. There is a need for a simplification of such systems, so that they act as tools for engaging service users, rather than merely ensuring professional accountability. Our data suggest that terms such as 'resistant' or 'hard to engage service users' may say as much about the technocratic, bureaucratic, inflexible structures of social services as they do about the families involved.

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Notes

[1] In Scotland, to be 'registered' is to be placed on the child protection register. This is a list of children in a given area who have been identified at a child protection conference as being at significant risk of harm, and who are thus subject to a child protection plan.

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